Clinging to Mammy

the FAITHFUL SLAVE in
TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA

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For my family
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CLINGING TO MAMMY
INTRODUCTION: THE FAITHFUL SLAVE

WHEN NEWSPAPERS reported her death in 1923, many obituar- ies sounded a common refrain summed up by a headline in the Missouri Farmer: “Aunt Jemima Is Gone.” Americans had first fallen in love with the ex-slave cook and her secret recipe for pancakes at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in the summer and fall of 1893. By all accounts her debut there had been glorious. Fairgoers were drawn to the giant barrel-shaped concession of the R. T. Davis Milling Company by the smell of buttery hotcakes and the sounds of laughter and applause. Rising above the general roar of thousands of people moving through the Agriculture Building, a singular voice called to them with a southern cadence reminiscent of the old days. It was the voice of an old black woman they would soon come to know as Aunt Jemima. As she slid steaming pancakes onto platters, the woman described her days as a slave. Winking and grinning at the audience she held enthralled, Aunt Jemima told of happy times passed on a beautiful plantation, of endless parties and parades of houseguests for whom she cooked bountiful stacks of her delicious pancakes, which were famous throughout the South. Oh, how they loved those hotcakes! And now, thanks to the Davis Milling Company, people all over the country could have pancakes made from Aunt Jemima’s secret recipe. All you had to do was add water to the mix, she explained; no
need to measure or have eggs and milk on hand, just a little water and a hot griddle for perfect pancakes every time. They were so easy to make, and so delicious. It was as if Aunt Jemima herself was in your kitchen making them for you. People in the dense crowd at the exhibition stand crushed forward to get a better glimpse of the woman who had been a slave and to sample her pancakes. Aunt Jemima kept the spirituals, work songs, and stories coming while she flipped hotcakes, poured fresh discs of batter, and filled plates for her hungry audience. They were hungry for the food, hungry for grand plantation abundance and refined southern hospitality, but most of all, they were hungry for her.1

The elderly woman whose death was reported in 1923 was not Aunt Jemima. No such person had actually existed. The woman who was struck by a car and killed, who for thirty years had held the job of acting the role of “Aunt Jemima,” was Nancy Green. While Aunt Jemima was dubbed “The Most Famous Colored Woman in the World” after the Columbian Exposition, Nancy Green’s life was obscured by the trademark figure she portrayed and by the faithful slave image she embodied. Green, born into slavery in Kentucky, had made her way north to Chicago, where she worked as a domestic servant like so many other African American women before and after her. Someone visiting her employer’s home believed that she might satisfy R. T. Davis’s search for a black woman to demonstrate his new product. Perhaps it was her skill, her convenient location in Chicago, her force of personality, or all of these attributes that suggested her suitability to portray “Aunt Jemima.” What is clear is that Green did not come to Chicago at the behest of a milling concern, nor had she arrived with a secret recipe for terrific pancakes, and no one had ever called her “Aunt Jemima” before. Vivid accounts of her debut at the fair have been told over and over, yet they all ultimately trace back to advertisements and pro-
motional materials produced after the event, not to eyewitnesses, and not to Green herself. Nancy Green’s experience of working at the exposition was transformed, through ads and a pseudo-slave narrative produced by the R. T. Davis Company, into an event in the commercially constructed life of Aunt Jemima. And when the real Nancy Green was accidentally killed, her popular eulogy became “Aunt Jemima Is Gone.”

But in 1923 Aunt Jemima was not gone. Both the trademark and the popular figure of the slave mammy outlived Nancy Green. Stories and images of the slave as a faithful and loving dependent, of which the mammy has been the most popular representation, drenched American culture and politics throughout the twentieth century and persist to this day. Another popular variation is Scarlett O’Hara’s feisty but adoring and loyal mammy in the film Gone With the Wind (1939) as she was played by Hattie McDaniel. The fictional character whose only name was her descriptor, “Mammy,” remains dear to the hearts—and plantation fantasies—of many. Yet Aunt Jemima, her smile beaming still from store shelves, freezer sections, and kitchen cupboards, is the most enduring image of the faithful slave. The drama of Nancy Green’s life eclipsed by the mammy figure has been played again and again in the experiences of black women in the United States. The myth of the faithful slave lingers because so many white Americans have wished to live in a world in which African Americans are not angry over past and present injustices, a world in which white people were and are not complicit, in which the injustices themselves—of slavery, Jim Crow, and ongoing structural racism—seem not to exist at all. The mammy figure affirmed their wishes. The narrative of the faithful slave is deeply rooted in the American racial imagination. It is a story of our national past and political future that blurs the lines between myth and memory,
guilt and justice, stereotype and individuality, commodity and humanity.

“Mammies,” as they have been described and remembered by whites, like all faithful slaves, bear little resemblance to actual enslaved women of the antebellum period. Black women did work in white homes, cooked innumerable meals, cared for white children, and surely formed emotional ties to white family members at times, but the mammy was—and is—a fiction. She is the most visible character in the myth of the faithful slave, a set of stories, images, and ideas that have been passed down from generation to generation in the United States, through every possible popular medium, from fine art and literature to the vaudeville stage and cinema, and in countless novelty items from ashtrays to salt and pepper shakers. These narratives are locked emotionally and politically to the slave narrative genre. Early versions produced in the antebellum period by proslavery white southerners were explicitly reactionary. The stories were designed to provide reassurance that their authors’ patriarchal benevolence was real, and was recognized and appreciated by those they enslaved. They were hurled northward in response to the publication of slave narratives detailing the horror and inhumanity of the institution, the speaking tours by activist runaways, and the impact of abolitionist works such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. As personally satisfying as they were politically and economically potent, tales of faithful slavery appeared with ever greater frequency.

The mammy narrative embodied in the Aunt Jemima trademark dates back at least to the 1830s, when members of the planter class began using these stories to animate their assertions of slavery as benevolent and slave owning as honorable. “When my mother arrived in Charleston, she sought out a faithful servant as a nurse for her young family. Marga-
ret was her name, which we soon contracted into the endearing appellative of ‘Mammy Marget,’” a South Carolina gentleman explains to his visitor from New York City in a serial installment titled “Diary of an Invalid” in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1836. “She was the most devoted and faithful servant I ever knew. I loved and venerated her next to my mother.” The account, framed as the diary of a consumptive New Yorker who travels the globe seeking cures for his ailments, more amenable climates, and stories from the locals, shows that the popular mammy narrative was already well established by this time. Upon his arrival at the grand Charleston home of Colonel H. B. Ashton, the wan narrator is bewitched by the portrait of a young woman that hangs in the parlor. He learns that she is the colonel’s cousin who was driven mad and died young and “unspoiled” in the midst of the Revolutionary War when she learned in a single afternoon of the deaths of both her naval officer father and her soldier fiancé. While it is her story that drives the narrative, it is the affection and attention of “Mammy Marget” that makes the young woman’s character apparent and illuminates her love for these two men. With her last dying breath, fevered and hallucinating, she calls to her enslaved caretaker: “Mammy Marget . . . bring my bridal dress—the procession is waiting for me; to the church you know we must go to be united: there is Alfred and father too. Haste! Haste!”

Several key themes of the faithful slave narrative generally, and the depiction of the mammy explicitly, are revealed in this story. Accounts of enslaved people’s fidelity constituted the ultimate expression of southern paternalism, which held that the relationship of the master to the slave was removed from market forces and economic exigency and functioned more like a familial relationship between father and child based on a set of mutual obligations and responsibilities as well as affection. Proslavery theorists argued that this was
very different from the cold contract of “free labor,” under which bosses owed nothing but wages to the laborers they employed and could fire them at will. Slave owners claimed, by contrast, to be responsible for providing every aspect of enslaved people’s well-being, including clothing, food, housing, and medicine, and they bore this burden for the lifetime of their slaves as their obligation. The only thing required of the carefree slave in this scenario was work and loyalty. The faithful slave narrative, however, went one step further to argue that enslaved people appeared faithful and caring not because they bad to be or were violently compelled to be, but because their fidelity was heartfelt and indicative of their love for and dependence on their owners. At their core, stories of faithful slavery were expressions of the value, honor, and identity of whites. They had little if anything to do with the actual perceptions and attitudes of the enslaved. The conceit of a slave owner and Revolutionary War veteran recounting the story of his cousin and her mammy to his visitor from New York promotes this paternalist conception of slavery and underscores its significance for the periodical’s predominantly southern readership.

Such justifications were necessitated by the increasing radicalization of abolitionism in the United States in the 1830s and the appearance of exposés of the domestic slave trade and the brutalities of southern slavery. Accounts of sexual terror, violent punishment, and the torture of enslaved people were becoming more commonplace. The rapid expansion and movement of slavery to the South and West between 1820 and 1860 was made possible through a thriving intraregional market in slaves. In that forty-year period, at least 875,000 enslaved people were forcibly moved from the upper to the lower South, and several thousand more were regularly hired out for year-long contracts. Each one of their number represented the severing of family, friendship, and
community ties. Contrary to the claims of owners, the trade was not distant from the everyday experiences of enslavement or slave owning. The relationship between owner and enslaved was defined by the market. Responding to the persistent abolitionist focus on the evils of the trade and its massive dislocations of black people and families, slave owners and their allies told tender tales of grand plantations populated by elderly “aunties” and “uncles” and old mammies who could no longer work but were well cared for and held dear. The story of the faithful slave became a cornerstone of paternalist defenses of slavery and rationales for elite southern patterns of domesticity.7

“Diary of an Invalid” elaborates several aspects of the mammy figure’s character and relationships to whites that would come to dominate tales of faithful slavery, particularly its gendered elements. Recounted by a southern gentleman who insists that he loved his mammy like his mother, the colonel’s story dwells on the enslaved woman’s connections to white women in the household, first to his mother and then to his young cousin. This juxtaposition of black and white womanhood remained a key facet of the mammy narrative. Black and white women had been called “mammy” before the 1830s, whether as a maternal endearment or an indication of enslavement, but in the context of spreading abolitionist sentiment, countered by increasingly detailed visions of planter paternalism and refinement, the name and descriptor took on a very specific meaning. The figure of the faithful slave came to bear much of the burden of slavery’s defense. This is made clear in another story from the Southern Literary Messenger published two years later. Similarly framed as a story told among whites, “A Couple of Loveletters” is intended to be a humorous tale of a young man’s meddling in the affairs of “old Aunt Dinah,” with the unwitting help of his enslaved playmate, Charles. The now